

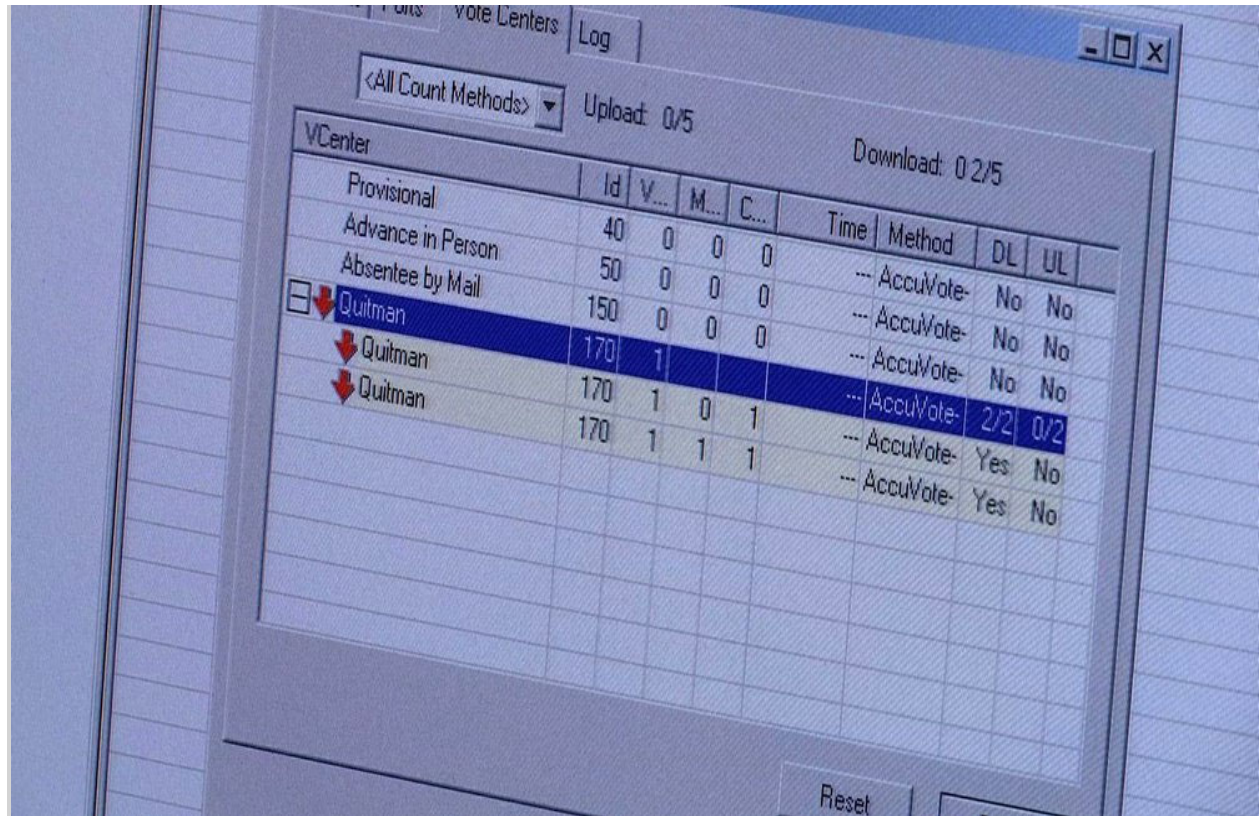
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APNewsBreak: Georgia election server wiped after suit filed

By FRANK BAJAK

October 26, 2017



A computer server crucial to a lawsuit against Georgia election officials was quietly wiped clean by its custodians just after the suit was filed, The Associated Press has learned.

The server's data was destroyed July 7 by technicians at the Center for Elections Systems at Kennesaw State University, which runs the state's election system. The data wipe was revealed in an email sent last week from an assistant state attorney general to plaintiffs in the case that was later obtained by the AP. More emails obtained in a public records request confirmed the wipe.

The lawsuit, filed July 3 by a diverse group of election reform advocates, aims to force Georgia to retire its antiquated and heavily criticized election technology. The server in question, which served as a statewide staging location for key election-related data, [made national headlines](#) in June after a

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security expert disclosed a gaping security hole that wasn't fixed six months after he reported it to election authorities.

WIPE OUT

It's not clear who ordered the server's data irretrievably erased.

The Kennesaw elections center answers to Georgia's secretary of state, Brian Kemp, a Republican running for governor in 2018 and the suit's main defendant. His spokeswoman issued a statement Thursday saying his office had neither involvement nor advanced warning of the decision. It blamed "the undeniable ineptitude" at the Kennesaw State elections center.

After declining comment for more than 24 hours, Kennesaw State's media office issued a statement late Thursday attributing the server wiping to "standard operating procedure." It did not respond to the AP's question on who ordered the action.

Plaintiffs in the lawsuit, mostly Georgia voters, want to scrap the state's 15-year-old vote-management system — particularly its 27,000 AccuVote touchscreen voting machines, hackable devices that don't use paper ballots or keep hardcopy proof of voter intent. The plaintiffs were counting on an independent security review of the Kennesaw server, which held elections staging data for counties, to demonstrate the system's unreliability.

Wiping the server "forestalls any forensic investigation at all," said Richard DeMillo, a Georgia Tech computer scientist following the case. "People who have nothing to hide don't behave this way."

STATE SECURITY

The server data could have revealed whether Georgia's most recent elections were compromised by hackers. The plaintiffs contend results of both last November's election and a special June 20 congressional runoff— won by Kemp's predecessor, Karen Handel — cannot be trusted.

Possible Russian interference in U.S. politics, including attempts to penetrate voting systems, has been an acute national preoccupation since the Obama administration sounded the alarm more than a year ago.

Kemp and his GOP allies insist Georgia's elections system is secure. But Marilyn Marks, executive director of the Coalition for Good Governance, a

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plaintiff, believes server data was erased precisely because the system isn't secure.

"I don't think you could find a voting systems expert who would think the deletion of the server data was anything less than insidious and highly suspicious," she said.

NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

It could still be possible to recover relevant information from the server.

The FBI is known to have made an exact data image of the server in March when it investigated the security hole. The Oct. 18 email disclosing the server wipe said the state attorney general's office was "reaching out to the FBI to determine whether they still have the image" and also disclosed that two backup servers were wiped clean Aug. 9, just as the lawsuit moved to federal court.

On Wednesday, the attorney general's office notified the court of its intent to subpoena the FBI seeking the image.

Atlanta FBI spokesman Stephen Emmett would not say if that image still exists. Nor would he say whether agents examined it to determine whether the server's files might have been altered by unauthorized users.

FAILING TO SERVICE THE SERVER

A 180-page collection of Kennesaw State emails, obtained Friday by the Coalition for Good Governments via an open records search, details the destruction of the data on all three servers and a partial and ultimately ineffective effort by Kennesaw State systems engineers to fix the main server's security hole.

As a result of the failed effort, sensitive data on Georgia's 6.7 million voters — including Social Security numbers, party affiliation and birthdates — as well as passwords used by county officials to access elections management files remained exposed for months.

The problem was first discovered by Atlanta security researcher Logan Lamb while doing online research in August 2016. He informed the election center's director at the time, noting in an email "there is a strong possibility your site is already compromised."

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Based on his review of the emails, Lamb believes that electronic polling books could have been altered in Georgia's biggest counties to add or drop voters or to scramble their data. Malicious hackers could have altered the templates of voting machine memory cards to skew results. An attacker could even have potentially modified "ballot-building" files to corrupt the outcome, said Lamb, who works at Atlanta-based security firm Bastille Networks.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Though striking, the wayward election server is seen as just part of a much larger problem.

The Department of Homeland Security says 21 states had elections systems scanned or penetrated by Russia-backed hackers last year, though there's no evidence they altered voting outcomes.

But computer security experts say it's possible Russians or other malicious actors have sown undetected booby traps in the highly decentralized U.S. voting landscape. In June, a leaked National Security Agency memo showed that 122 elections officials in various states were [targeted with phishing emails](#) crafted by Russian agents intent on stealing their passwords.

CALL TO INVESTIGATE

Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr was urged Thursday to investigate. GOP state Rep. Scot Turner: "They should go and look at who did it and why they did it and see ... whether there was criminal intent." Carr's office declined comment.

Georgia U.S. Rep Hank Johnson, a Democrat, separately said the server wipe "appears to be a willful and premeditated destruction of evidence" by election officials, adding, "Georgia voters should be as outraged as I am."

Sara Henderson, executive director of Common Cause Georgia, noted Kemp has repeatedly denied involvement in the university's decisions on voting machine security.

"Georgia is not creating a climate of voting integrity for our citizens by continuing to blame shift," Henderson said via email.

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